CHAPTER 4

THE CASE FOR COLLUSION

The Election

2015–2016

It is now apparent that there was no bright line separating the two campaigns to elect Donald Trump. Throughout his presidential campaign, members of Trump's inner circle had secret conversations and meetings with numerous Kremlin-linked individuals, which they repeatedly lied about or failed to disclose. Though much about these contacts remains unknown, what is known provides strong evidence that the Kremlin and the Trump campaign were in continual communication.

A PRO-RUSSIA CANDIDATE

From the day he entered the race, June 16, 2015, Trump staked out a pro-Russia platform. Trump told Fox News's Bill O'Reilly that his experiences with Russians in Moscow led him to believe that "you can get along with those people and get along with them well." Over the course of the next month, Trump made similar on-air comments to Fox News's Sean Hannity and in a speech at the City Club of Chicago. On July 11, he made his first direct reference to repealing sanctions when responding to a question from Maria Butina, a graduate student who the U.S. Department of Justice later identified as an alleged Russian agent. Butina also allegedly infiltrated the National Rifle Association and other conservative groups on behalf of the Russian government. (Butina has pleaded not guilty to the charges and, as of this writing, is in jail awaiting trial.) In a question-and-answer session with Trump in Las Vegas, Butina asked whether sanctions were part of his "foreign politics." Trump replied, "I know Putin and I'll tell you what, we get along with Putin. . . . I don't think you'd need the sanctions." Trump went on to praise Russian President Vladimir Putin dozens of times during the primaries, frequently pairing his praise with suggestions that, if elected, he would consider lifting sanctions on Russia.

These remarks stood out because they directly contradicted decades of Republican sentiment. Since the end of World War II, the Republican Party had actively staked out a hawkish position on Russia. The party's previous presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, famously described Russia as America's "number one geopolitical foe." Trump's Republican opponents frequently attacked not only Putin but also Obama, whom they saw as having enabled Putin's increased stature through Obama's nonconfrontational foreign policy. Trump, on the other hand, repeatedly called for even greater deference to Putin and Russia, saying at a debate in November 2015 that he hoped to work with Russia to "knock the hell out of ISIS."

What also makes Trump's stance on Russia notable is that it was one of the few issues on which he remained consistent, despite there being no clear political rationale for doing so. During his campaign, Trump was both famously heterodox (for example, he repeatedly attacked free-trade agreements, long a linchpin of Republican economic policy) and famously difficult to pin down on any one position (for example, he promised he would both repeal the Affordable Care Act and protect Medicaid and Medicare, and frequently outright denied his own previous statements and policy positions). Even Trump's noted affinity for autocratic leaders failed to account for his stance; for example, though he has praised Chinese President Xi Jinping for his authoritarian ways, Trump has also repeatedly criticized—as well as directly antagonized—China on economic issues. As a result, his continual praise for Putin and Russia drew significant attention, even before reporting after the election revealed the extent of Russian interference and the dozens of contacts and meetings between Trump's campaign and Kremlin-linked officials.

2015: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

By the time Trump announced his candidacy on June 16, 2015, the U.S. intelligence community was reportedly already aware of the Kremlin's interest in Trump. According to The Wall Street Journal, in spring 2015, "US spy agencies captured Russian government officials discussing associates of Mr. Trump, including Mr. [Paul] Manafort," who would later serve as the second of Trump's three campaign heads. In late 2015, U.K. intelligence agencies also reportedly spotted suspicious "interactions" between people in Trump's orbit and Kremlin-linked individuals during "routine surveillance of Russian intelligence assets."

That Russia was in contact with Trump associates early on is especially notable considering that, at this point, the Trump campaign was reportedly largely a family affair. According to *Forbes*, when reporters visited the campaign's headquarters in Trump Tower in November 2015, several months after Trump announced his candidacy, "there was literally nothing there. No people—and no desks or chairs or computers awaiting the arrival of staffers. Just campaign manager Corey Lewandowski, spokesperson Hope Hicks and a strategy that centered on Trump making headline-grabbing statements."

Around the same time, Russia reportedly began the cyberattacks that would prove central to its influence campaign. According to the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike, that summer the Russian hacking group Cozy Bear began its first phishing operation targeting the Democratic National Committee. By September, the FBI knew of the attack and informed the DNC that Russian hackers had "compromised at least one computer."

One contact between Trump's inner circle and the Kremlin early in the campaign involved Trump's business. The Trump Organization signed a letter of intent to license its name for a Trump Tower Moscow in October 2015. The next month, Trump's lawyer, Michael Cohen—one of the few individuals involved with the campaign from the beginning—and Cohen's longtime friend Felix Sater, the Russian-American real estate developer, explicitly discussed the deal in the context of the election. On November 3, Sater, who has claimed ties to Russian organized crime and to the Kremlin, said the project would offer a chance for Trump to demonstrate his business acumen to the public. Sater then bragged, "I will get Putin on this program and we will get Donald elected. . . . our boy can become president of the USA and we can engineer it." In January 2016, Cohen reportedly emailed Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov to request help with the project. Peskov initially said that he received the email but did not respond; however, Cohen's November 2018 plea deal with Special Counsel Robert Mueller revealed that Cohen discussed the project with Peskov's assistant, at one point reportedly offering to give Putin the

proposed development's $50 million penthouse. According to his plea deal, Cohen discussed the project extensively with Trump and members of the Trump family, and even planned to travel to Russia during the campaign to pursue the development, but cancelled the trip on June 14, 2016, the same day that *The Washington Post* first reported Russia's efforts to hack the Democratic National Committee. After Cohen pleaded guilty, Trump acknowledged that he knew about the project during the campaign, calling it "very legal & very cool" and falsely claiming the negotiations had been public knowledge during the campaign. The project ultimately fell through in July 2016.

MARCH 2016: THE CAMPAIGNS GAIN STEAM

The first few months of 2016 saw Trump's campaign build both momentum and connections to Russia. This period was marked by three major concurrent developments. First, Trump began to win in Republican primary contests, increasingly staking a claim as the prohibitive favorite for the nomination. Second, Russia became significantly more aggressive in implementing its influence campaign. And third, Trump's campaign hired several individuals with conspicuous ties to Russia, many of whom would become key players in his campaign's collusion with the Kremlin.

RUSSIA ESCALATES ITS ONLINE CAMPAIGN

As Trump won primaries, Russia significantly escalated its hacking campaign. Having already penetrated the DNC, Russian hackers launched another phishing expedition on March 10, 2016, targeting Democratic operatives. It was during this round of attacks that, on March 19, 2016, Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta received the phishing email that would provide Russian hackers with access to his account and the emails they would later publish in the final month of the campaign through WikiLeaks—a known cut-out for Russian intelligence. (Podesta is the founder of the Center for American Progress Action Fund and the Center for American Progress.)

Hacking was not the only measure Russian agents took to support their candidate. They also implemented a multifaceted media campaign to boost Trump's candidacy, an effort that became increasingly brazen in early 2016. According to the U.S. intelligence community's January 2017 report, "Starting in March 2016, Russian Government-linked actors began openly supporting President-elect Trump's candidacy in media aimed at English-speaking audiences," such as the state-run news outlets RT and Sputnik.

RUSSIA-LINKED FIGURES JOIN THE CAMPAIGN

In February, Reuters reported that the retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who in December 2015 sat next to Putin at RT's annual gala in Moscow, was advising Trump. On March 21, in an interview with the editorial board of *The Washington Post*, Trump named his foreign policy team, led by then-Senator Jeff Sessions and including Carter Page and George Papadopoulos. At the time, the announcement drew attention because few people had heard of Page or Papadopoulos; both have since become important figures in the Russia investigation. However, the FBI already had reason to believe Page was a Russian asset: In 2015, the bureau broke up a Russian spy ring that had attempted to recruit Page, and had one Russian agent on tape saying that Page's "enthusiasm works for me." Finally, on March 28, Paul Manafort, a longtime political operative who spent a decade working for a pro-Putin party in Ukraine, joined the campaign as an unpaid adviser. He would later serve as the second of Trump's three campaign leads.

CAMPAIGNS IN CONTACT (MARCH THROUGH JULY)

Between March and the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July 2016, at least five individuals from the Trump campaign reportedly communicated with Kremlin officials or allies. According to the October 2017 guilty plea he signed, on March 14, 2016, George Papadopoulos met for the first of at least three meetings with Joseph Mifsud, a Maltese professor and reported Russian intelligence asset. Mifsud later told Papadopoulos that Russia had "dirt" on Hillary Clinton in the form of "thousands of emails" and introduced him to a woman identified in Papadopoulos's plea agreement as "the Female Russian National," whom Mifsud claimed was Putin's niece, and Ivan Timofeev, who claimed to be an employee of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After Papadopoulos's plea deal became public, Mifsud described the allegations as "baloney" and denied that he "spoke of secrets regarding Hillary Clinton," but Mifsud appears to have disappeared since. Papadopoulos informed multiple senior campaign officials about the meeting, including Lewandowski and Trump campaign senior policy advisor Stephen Miller. He also discussed meeting Mifsud with the Australian ambassador to the United Kingdom, who in turn informed U.S. intelligence officials; their conversation would ultimately become the inciting incident for the U.S. intelligence community's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

On April 11, Manafort reportedly emailed his former deputy, Konstantin Kilimnik, who was later named as a Russian intelligence officer by the Mueller investigation, starting a conversation in which Manafort appeared to offer to set up private briefings for the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska, who has alleged that Manafort owes him almost $20 million. Manafort's lawyers have denied that this was the intent behind the emails, and dispute that Manafort owes Deripaska money. According to *The Guardian*, Manafort also visited Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London in March 2015; both Manafort and Assange deny having met, and *The Guardian*'s report remains unconfirmed.

On April 27, Trump gave a foreign policy address at the Center for National Interest at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., where he called for warmer relations with Russia. Prior to the speech, then-Sen. Sessions met with the Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

In late May, Trump Jr. met with Aleksander Torshin, the deputy head of Russia's central bank and a leading member of Putin's United Russia Party, at an NRA convention in Louisville, Kentucky. Torshin also played a key role in assisting Maria Butina, the Russian graduate student who, as previously mentioned, allegedly infiltrated the NRA and other conservative groups on behalf of the Russian government.

And in June, the Trump campaign aide Rick Dearborn fielded an email from a West Virginia-based Republican operative named Rick Clay offering to set up a meeting between Trump and Putin; according to CNN, "the Trump campaign appears to have rejected the meeting request."

THE JUNE 9 MEETING: COLLUSION AT TRUMP TOWER

The most famous meeting between the two campaigns took place on June 9, 2016. The roots of the meeting go back to July 2015, one month after Trump announced his candidacy. That month, Rob Goldstone, a music producer and publicist who first become acquainted with the Trumps during the Miss Universe Pageant in 2013, emailed Trump's assistant asking whether Trump "would welcome a meeting with President Putin." According to The Washington Post, "there is no indication that Trump or his assistant followed up on Goldstone's offer," and Goldstone's attorney declined to comment.

Goldstone had more success when, on June 3, 2016, he sent an email to Trump Jr. with the subject line "Russia – Clinton – private and confidential" in which he offered to set up a

meeting regarding "official documents and information that would incriminate Hillary [Clinton] and her dealings with Russia and would be very useful to your father" as "part of Russia and its government's support for Mr. Trump." Trump Jr. responded, "if it's what you say I love it especially later in the summer." On June 7, 2016, the pair set up the meeting for June 9.

The meeting occurred on June 9, 2016, at 4 p.m. in Trump Tower. Attending on behalf of the Trump campaign were Trump Jr., Jared Kushner, and Paul Manafort; representing Russian interests were Goldstone, the lawyer and Magnitsky Act opponent Natalia Veselnitskaya, the real estate executive and suspected money launderer Irakly Kaveladze, and the lobbyist and former counterintelligence officer Rinat Akhmetshin, along with a translator. According to the Trump campaign, the group discussed "adoptions," believed to be code for the discussion of the American sanctions bill known as the Magnitsky Act because Putin's response to the Magnitsky Act was to ban America adoptions of sick and disabled Russian orphans.

Taken together, these contacts demonstrate the overlap between the two campaigns to elect Donald Trump. By the end of June, at least ten individuals involved with the Trump campaign—George Papadopoulos, then-Sen. Jeff Sessions, Michael Cohen, Jared Kushner, Paul Manafort, Donald Trump Jr., Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, Roger Stone, Michael Caputo, and Rick Dearborn—reportedly had contacts or meetings with at least 17 Kremlin-linked individuals: Dmitry Peskov, Peskov's assistant, Julian Assange, Joseph Mifsud, the "Female Russian National," Ivan Timofeev, Sergey Kislyak, Felix Sater, Rob Goldstone, Natalia Veselnitskaya, Rinat Akhmetshin, Irakly Kaveladze, Henry Greenberg, Konstantin Kilimnik, Aleksander Torshin, Vladimir Putin, the individual who emailed Rick Dearborn, and, potentially, Oleg Deripaska. Though it is unknown how directly each individual was engaged in the Kremlin's effort to support Trump, both the number of meetings and contact and the high level of many of the participants on both sides offer key evidence of the two campaigns' willingness to collude.

THE WORLD TAKES NOTICE

At least eight countries reportedly passed information to U.S. intelligence agencies about Russia's attempts to interfere in the 2016 election between the time of Trump's announcement and his nomination. According to *The New York Times*, the FBI launched its investigation into the matter after Papadopoulos drunkenly mentioned his meetings with Mifsud to the Australian ambassador to the United Kingdom, who passed the information back to his government, which passed it to the U.S. intelligence community. Other countries sharing intelligence reportedly included the United Kingdom, Germany, Estonia, Poland, France, the Netherlands, and "one of the Baltic States," which in April 2016 reportedly gave CIA Director John Brennan "a tape recording of a conversation about money from the Kremlin going into the US presidential campaign."

Meanwhile, in June, the former MI6 agent Christopher Steele began compiling his dossier on the Trump campaign's ties to Russia, which appears to allude to some of the contacts that were not yet public knowledge. In his first report, Steele wrote that two sources—a "senior Russian Foreign Ministry figure" and "a close associate of TRUMP who had organized and managed his recent trips to Moscow"—told him that "the Kremlin had been feeding TRUMP and his team valuable intelligence on his opponents, including the Democratic presidential candidate Hillary CLINTON." Steele also noted that "the Kremlin's cultivation operation on TRUMP also had comprised offering him various lucrative real estate development business deals in Russia," but that the offers did not pan out.

JULY: QUID PRO QUO AT THE CONVENTION?

July saw more meetings and contacts between the Trump campaign and Russia and marked a turning point not only because Trump officially secured the Republican nomination for president but also because Russia began to implement its digital strategy.

On July 7, Carter Page traveled to Russia to speak at the New Economic School in Moscow. According to the Steele dossier, during the trip Page met with Igor Sechin, a close associate of Putin's and the head of the Russian state-run energy company Rosneft, and Igor Divyekin, the head of the lower house of the Russian legislature. Page denied these meetings occurred; however, according to his own congressional testimony, after the speech Page met with Russia's deputy prime minister, Arkady Dvorkovich, and Andrey Baranov, the head of investor relations at Rosneft. The next day he emailed another of Trump's advisers, J.D. Gordon, a longtime Republican operative, about "incredible insights and outreach . . . from a few Russian legislators and senior members of the presidential administration here." Page later testified that he communicated with multiple Trump campaign officials in advance of his trip, including then-Sen. Sessions, Gordon, campaign manager Corey Lewandowski, and spokeswoman Hope Hicks, to receive approval.

Page's Moscow trip features prominently in the Steele dossier. According to Steele, the Russian officials with whom Page met "raised with PAGE the issues of future bilateral energy cooperation and prospects for an associated move to lift Ukraine-related Western sanctions against Russia," to which Page "reacted positively . . . but had been generally non-committal in response." The dossier also says the Rosneft executives with whom Page met offered him "the brokerage of up to a 19 per cent (privatized) stake in Rosneft in return" for lifting sanctions, and that Page "confirmed that were TRUMP elected US president, then sanctions on Russia would be lifted." Page has denied the allegations, calling the dossier "dodgy," but acknowledged that he did meet with Russian officials while in Moscow.

A week later, during the debates over the GOP's official platform, the Trump campaign reportedly requested a change that represented a major divergence from Republican norms—and that seemed to manifest the campaign's pro-Russia stance. Prior to the 2016 election, Republican politicians had almost universally attacked the Obama administration for refusing to provide lethal weapons assistance to Ukraine. Language calling upon the government to do so was reportedly included in a draft of the official GOP platform.

But during the debates over the platform, which lasted from July 11 to July 15, 2016, that language was softened, from offering "lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine's Armed Forces" to merely calling for "appropriate assistance." The platform committee reportedly made the change at the behest of J.D. Gordon.

Initially, the Trump campaign dissembled about the change. Speaking on "Meet the Press" on July 31, Trump's then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort said the change "absolutely did not come from the Trump campaign." The same day, Trump told ABC that his campaign was behind the change, but denied having been personally involved in the decision. Gordon, too, offered conflicting accounts, disputing that he played a role before acknowledging he had pushed the platform committee to change the language.

Since then, it has become clearer that the Trump campaign was behind the change. Page, who had just returned from Moscow, reportedly emailed Gordon and other campaign advisers praising their work on changing the amendment, and several other Republican operatives involved in the platform committee have since corroborated reports that Gordon led the effort to change the platform. Gordon was also one of three members of the Trump campaign, along with

Sessions and Page, to reportedly meet with Russian ambassador Kislyak at the Convention on July 20.

DNC HACK AND RELEASE

After the RNC, Russia began implementing one of the major planks of its digital strategy. On July 22, WikiLeaks published the first batch of what would become a steady stream of emails it had stolen from Democratic operatives, revealing messages acquired from the Democratic National Committee's servers. The leak seemed orchestrated to disrupt the Democratic National Convention, which began three days later in Philadelphia. The leak included emails from the committee's chairwoman, congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), and other operatives in which they seemed dismissive toward Senator Bernie Sanders's candidacy. The emails fueled outrage among Sanders supporters who felt the national Democratic Party had unduly influenced the primary process toward Hillary Clinton, leading to protests during the convention and to Rep. Wasserman Schultz's resignation.

By the convention's end, consensus was growing that Russia was behind the leaked emails. On July 26, U.S. intelligence sources told The New York Times that they had "'high confidence' that the Russian government was behind the theft of emails and documents from the Democratic National Committee," although they had not yet determined whether the hacks were "intended as fairly routine cyberespionage . . . or as part of an effort to manipulate the 2016 presidential election."

Trump not only cast doubt on the intelligence community's assessment but called upon Russia to do more. In a July 27 press conference, Trump said that blaming Russia was "a total deflection," adding, "it's probably China, or it could be somebody sitting in his bed." He then urged Russia to hack into Clinton's email account: "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing," he said, referring to the ongoing scandal regarding Clinton's private email server, continuing, "I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press." According to the special counsel's 2018 indictment of the 12 Russian hackers who allegedly stole emails from John Podesta and the DNC, they attempted later that night to infiltrate Clinton's private email server. Though the campaign claimed the comment was a joke, Trump doubled down the next morning, tweeting, "If Russia or any other country or person has Hillary Clinton's 33,000 illegally deleted emails, perhaps they should share them with the FBI!"

THE GENERAL ELECTION: OPERATIONALIZING COLLUSION

Individuals associated with the Trump campaign reportedly continued to interact with Kremlin-linked individuals throughout the final months of the campaign. It is now known (as of October 29, 2018) that there were at least 76 contacts and 22 meetings between the two groups, involving at least 11 Trump officials and 21 Russians. Additionally, despite having access to the intelligence community's growing consensus that Russia was trying to interfere in the election, Trump continued to question whether Russia was behind the hacks, including during all three presidential debates and in a September 8 interview with Russia's state-run propaganda channel RT.

Meanwhile, Russia escalated its campaign on Trump's behalf, often in ways that strongly resembled the Trump team's own strategies. Many of Russia's tactics, including stealing and leaking private communications and attempting to hack private companies, are illegal; others, such as funding armies of online bots and trolls to spread dissent and disinformation, might be legal—if atypical—if conducted by American citizens, but not when carried out by a foreign government.

Russia's most direct contribution to Trump's campaign was hacking and releasing emails from Trump's opponents, which effectively gave the Trump campaign an unmatched "opposition research" capability. Trump eagerly embraced WikiLeaks during the campaign, publicly mentioning the website 164 times in the final month of the campaign alone.

Even at the time, there was evidence that people in Trump's orbit had advance knowledge of WikiLeaks's plans. Roger Stone, a Republican operative with a self-professed reputation as a "dirty trickster" and a long history of informally advising Trump, publicly stated multiple times in August that he was in contact with not only WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange but also the Russian hacker who claimed credit for stealing the emails. One of Stone's statements that especially stands out came on August 21, when Stone tweeted, "Trust me, it will soon [be] Podesta's time in the barrel." The tweet seemed to presage WikiLeaks's publication of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta's emails, which Podesta himself did not know had been hacked until WikiLeaks began to leak them. Reporting by *The Wall Street Journal* suggests that Stone, through an intermediary, had increasingly specific contacts with WikiLeaks. In emails between Stone and his longtime associate, the conservative radio host Randy Credico, Stone appears to allude to emails that have not yet been released, and even suggests rollout strategies for future releases.

Stone continues to dispute reports of foreknowledge of the WikiLeaks dumps during the campaign, and at one point even preemptively denied a report on the subject. However, a draft plea agreement between Mueller's team and Jerome Corsi, a conspiracy theorist and long-time associate of Stone's, suggests otherwise. Citing emails between the two, the plea agreement shows how Stone tasked Corsi to contact WikiLeaks about the stolen emails they had received from Russia that could damage the Clinton campaign. Through an intermediary, Corsi contacted WikiLeaks about the stolen emails and then passed Stone advance information about them. Corsi ultimately rejected the plea agreement, claiming he did not, as Mueller alleges, lie to investigators about his foreknowledge of WikiLeaks, and that emails in which Corsi appeared to refer to inside information merely reflect educated guesses.

Reporting since the election has revealed that others associated with the Trump campaign also communicated with WikiLeaks or Russian hackers during the campaign. The closest to Trump was his son Donald Trump Jr., who received a direct message from WikiLeaks on Twitter on September 20. The two exchanged several messages during the final month of the campaign, including one in which WikiLeaks suggested Trump contest the results of the election if he lost. Alexander Nix, the head of Cambridge Analytica, the data firm Jared Kushner hired to run the campaign's digital operations, also reportedly contacted WikiLeaks in June 2016 about assisting with the dissemination of the hacked emails. Both sides have confirmed that the outreach occurred. Assange has said that WikiLeaks received, but rejected, the offer. Additionally, the Republican donor Peter Smith told *The Wall Street Journal* in June 2017 that he had independently organized a team to try to establish contact with Russian hackers to obtain Clinton's emails during the campaign. Finally, George Papadopoulos apparently knew before anybody else that Russia had the Clinton campaign's emails, having heard about them from Mifsud in April.

The clearest evidence that WikiLeaks and Russia were working on Trump's behalf came on October 7, 2016. That afternoon, at 4:03 p.m., *The Washington Post* published the explosive "Access Hollywood" tape, behind-the-scenes footage from 2005 in which Trump bragged about groping women without their consent. Just 29 minutes later, WikiLeaks began publishing the contents of Podesta's email inbox. Whether there was explicit coordination between the Trump campaign and WikiLeaks remains unknown. Nevertheless, the move seemed to demonstrate

Russia and WikiLeaks's intent to help the Trump campaign: It is hard to imagine WikiLeaks timing the release on a Friday afternoon right after the biggest bombshell of the campaign unless the organization was actively trying to distract from *The Washington Post*'s story.

Second, the Kremlin provided communications support. As the intelligence community's January 6, 2017, report documents, Russia used networks of online bots and trolls, as well as state-run media such as RT America and Sputnik, to aggressively promote Trump's candidacy from almost the moment he announced he would be running. Russian bots and trolls allegedly helped tilt the online discourse in a pro-Trump direction throughout the campaign (and, even as social networks try to combat their influence, reportedly these bots and trolls retain the ability to steer conversations through hashtags and trending topics).

To supplement its online campaign, the Kremlin also reportedly purchased advertisements on social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. Though Facebook initially denied that its platform had been used to spread disinformation, it later revealed that Kremlin-linked companies spent at least $150,000 during the election on promoted posts, prompting a cascade of revelations showing how Russian-produced content across a variety of social networks reached millions of users. While most of the content was confined to the internet, some of the ads promoted real-world events, including an anti-refugee rally in an Idaho town where *Breitbart News* falsely claimed the local government was covering up a horrific crime spree by Muslim refugees.

The resemblance between the Kremlin's campaign and the official Trump campaign's online strategies goes beyond mutual support for Trump. The Russian companies purchasing advertisements reportedly used targeting techniques that strongly resemble those that Cambridge Analytica frequently touts. Cambridge Analytica has denied allegations that it colluded with Russian actors. In the weeks leading up to the election, both reportedly heavily targeted the Midwestern states that ultimately proved essential for Trump's victory, despite political analysts' doubts that he could win there. Both also specifically sought to depress turnout for Clinton among voters who supported Bernie Sanders in the primary by resurfacing wedge issues such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and, in the Kremlin's case, by promoting Sanders and the Green Party candidate, Jill Stein. Members of Trump's digital operations team bragged about their turnout-suppressing campaign mere days before the election.

These similarities raise the possibility that the campaigns shared not only a superficial strategy but also underlying data behind the decisions. The sophistication of Russia's social media campaign suggests that they had inside help: Not only did the Kremlin reportedly mirror and amplify the Trump campaign uncannily well, it also displayed a level of insight far above what could be expected from a foreign observer—it was, after all, above that of most domestic analysts. Indeed, Steele noted in July 2016 that there was an "extensive conspiracy between campaign team and Kremlin," with "exchange of information established in both directions."

A February 2018 indictment of 13 Russian operatives and three Russian companies that allegedly carried out the online propaganda campaign indicated a much broader and more sophisticated operation than was initially revealed. According to the indictment, the Russian operatives and companies cumulatively spent more than $1 million per month on not just the ads but also real-world events and outside consulting on how best to deploy their online strategy. They also reportedly conducted outreach with other pro-Trump groups, including one local field office, although the indictment does not mention if there was additional coordination with higher-level members of the Trump campaign.

Beyond the contacts between individuals linked to the two campaigns, they may have been able to trade information without having to meet face-to-face or exchange emails. On October 31, 2016, the journalist Franklin Foer wrote in *Slate* about a mysterious online connection between the Trump campaign and a Russian bank. According to Foer, a cybersecurity expert noticed in late July that a Trump Organization server appeared to be communicating with one at Alfa Bank, a Russian financial institution with links to the Kremlin. Though some experts suggested the communication could be spam, none was found to have been transferred between the two servers. In March 2017, CNN reported that the FBI and cybersecurity experts "continue to examine" the connection; however, it remains a mystery why the servers were communicating and what, if any, information was exchanged. The Trump Organization has denied "sending or receiving any communications from this email server."

Additionally, the Kremlin appears to have assisted with the financing of the campaign. All campaigns need money to support their efforts. It is why campaigns desperately fundraise. Russia has been known to provide financial backing to nationalist politicians, as it did with Marine Le Pen's campaign for the French presidency in 2017. Though the opacity of America's campaign finance system makes definitive proof hard to find, there are at least three indications that Russia financially supported Trump as well.

- First, according to the indictment of 13 Russian operatives involved in bot and troll farms, the Kremlin spent millions of dollars not only directly purchasing advertisements on social media but also paying for consulting and the labor of its agents. This money effectively subsidized the Trump campaign, which was otherwise known as a remarkably small, ill-organized team that seemed to spend surprisingly little to support its own efforts.
- Second, Trump, according to his disclosure forms, spent $66 million of his own personal fortune to fund his campaign. Beyond the fact that much of that personal fortune likely derives from financing and customers from Russia and other former Soviet countries, questions remain as to how Trump, whose money is largely tied up in illiquid assets such as real estate, was able to generate that much cash to spend. The Kremlin may also have found other ways to secretly route money into Trump's coffers—or those of organizations that supported him. For example, the National Rifle Association spent an unprecedented $30 million to support Trump. Since the election, the organization has revealed that it received $2,512.85 in contributions "from people associated with Russian addresses." However, Senate Democrats claimed in an interim report on their investigation that the NRA had received, and failed to disclose, significantly more from Russian sources.
- Third, investigators are reportedly probing several suspicious transactions during the campaign by Kremlin-linked figures. According to multiple reports by *BuzzFeed News*, these include millions of dollars in transactions involving the Agalarov family and their associates, such as Goldstone and Kaveladze, as well as wire transfers from the Russian government to its embassies in the United States. These reports suggest that Mueller and his team are investigating the allegation in the Steele dossier that the Kremlin used intermediaries to fund its efforts in 2016, including payments to Trump affiliates such as Page. Through their attorney, the Agalarovs have said that their transactions were legitimate payments to Goldstone and Kaveladze for business-related expenses, and the Kremlin has said its transfers were related to absentee voting for Russia's 2017 presidential election.

Finally, the Kremlin attacked actual voting infrastructure. According to a top-secret National Security Agency report obtained by *The Intercept*, by the end of September 2016 Russian hackers attempted to hack into voting infrastructure in 21 states, as well as the election systems

vendor VR Systems. The hackers then reportedly sent a second round of malware on October 31 or November 1, one week before the election. Though it remains unknown how successful these attacks were, NPR has reported that, on election day, several North Carolina precincts using software from VR Systems incurred technical difficulties that led to significant delays.

COLLUSION IN PLAIN SIGHT

The evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin is overwhelming. Much of it was in plain sight well before the election: Russia illegally hacked prominent Democrats' email accounts, then strategically published the information through a known cut-out to damage Trump's opponent. The Trump campaign, which had apparent foreknowledge of the leaks, relied heavily on the information to make its case, especially in the contest's final month. Meanwhile, Russia mobilized online armies of bots and trolls to promote Trump's candidacy, all while he continually denied receiving their support.

There likely was also collusion behind closed doors. Most of the dozens of contacts between the two campaigns remained secret until well after the election; so did many of the details of the Russian government's online efforts to tip the election in Trump's favor. As special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation continues, it is likely that information will continue to emerge painting a more detailed picture about how, and why, the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government against American democracy—and what the consequences of that conspiracy will be.